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The Heraldry of Beta Theta Pi

By George M. Chandler
Michigan, '97



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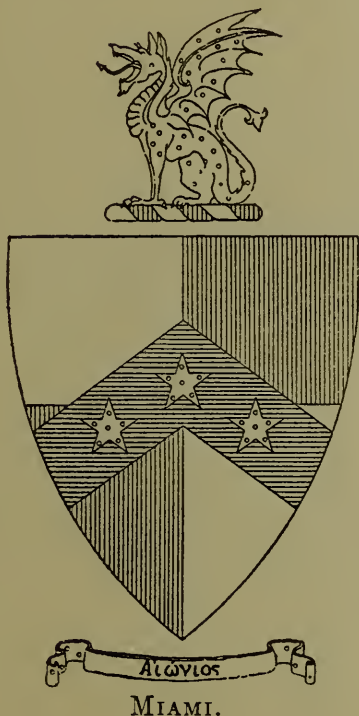
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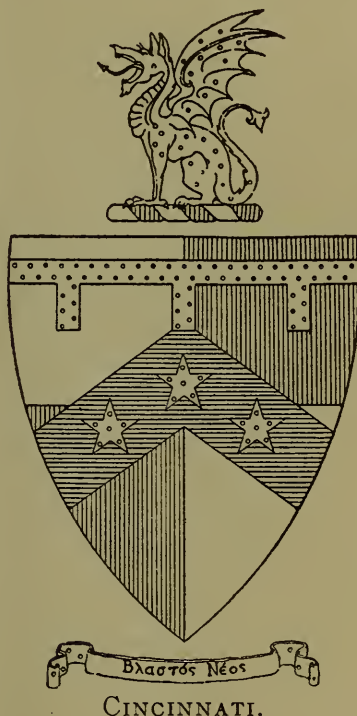
*The Heraldry of Beta Theta Pi

GEORGE M. CHANDLER, Michigan, '97

THE minutes of the first recorded meeting of the Alpha of Beta Theta Pi, August 9, 1839, contain a description of the Beta badge, so it can be said that the fraternity has always possessed all the insignia necessary. This was the



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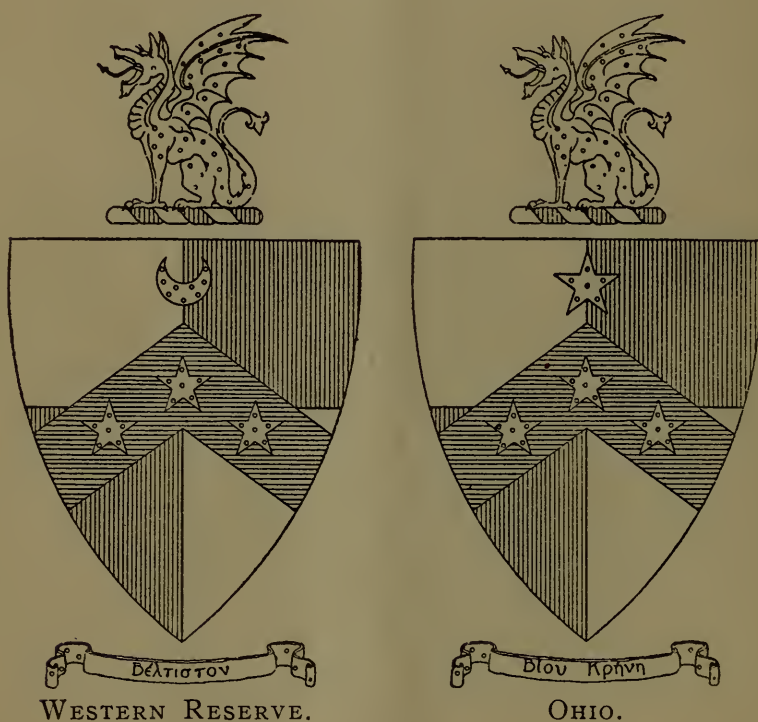
gold badge with the straight sides which bore the crescent. The first convention of August, 1842, however, authorized a change making the surface of black enamel and replacing the crescent by the wreath and diamond, thereby advancing the badge a step towards its final form. This was attained in 1848 when the straight sides were made concave.

As to the crescent it might be recorded that one reason for the change was that as borne on the Beta badge its horns were turned to the right as one faces the badge. Some Miami student, knowing more heraldry than his mates, or being a closer observer

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of the devices in the almanac, pointed out that the Beta badge bore the waning crescent and ridicule hastened the change.

From time to time, changes in size and curvature were made to suit the various fancies of maker or wearer. In 1879, an attempt at standardization was made by the adoption by the convention of a particular badge but this action seems to have had little effect on uniformity. Again in 1899, the convention adopted a sample badge which was quite generally worn until

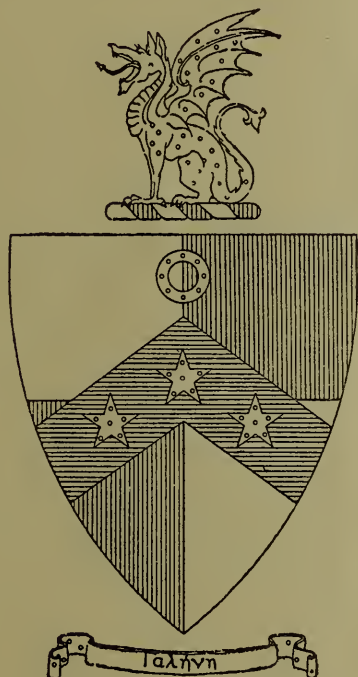


the convention of 1909 adopted as standard a badge accompanied by detailed drawings and description which has now actually as well as by law superseded all others.

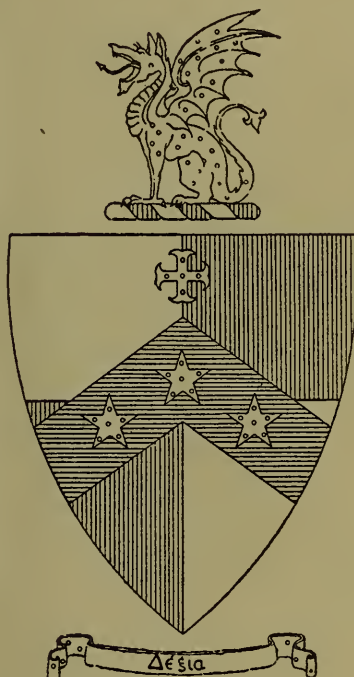
The convention of 1842 also authorized the use of chapter seals which displayed the chapter letter, clasped hands and three stars within a triangle and circle. Prior to the Civil War the use of these seals with wax was quite general. About this time another seal became current. It was used to emboss letter paper and consisted of the old fashioned nearly square badge with a chapter letter below it in Greek. Some of the old chapters still fondly retain these seals but their use has long entirely ceased.

Probably the next device to make its appearance after the badge and seal was the vignette. In 1846, Major Ransom had decorated the title page of the minute book of the Michigan chapter with a design evidently inspired by the triangular seal, and in 1859 this design reproduced as a wood cut headed the Beta list in Michigan's first College Annual.

In 1855 the Beta "Temple" appeared as the frontispiece in the catalog of that year.



WASHINGTON & JEFFERSON.



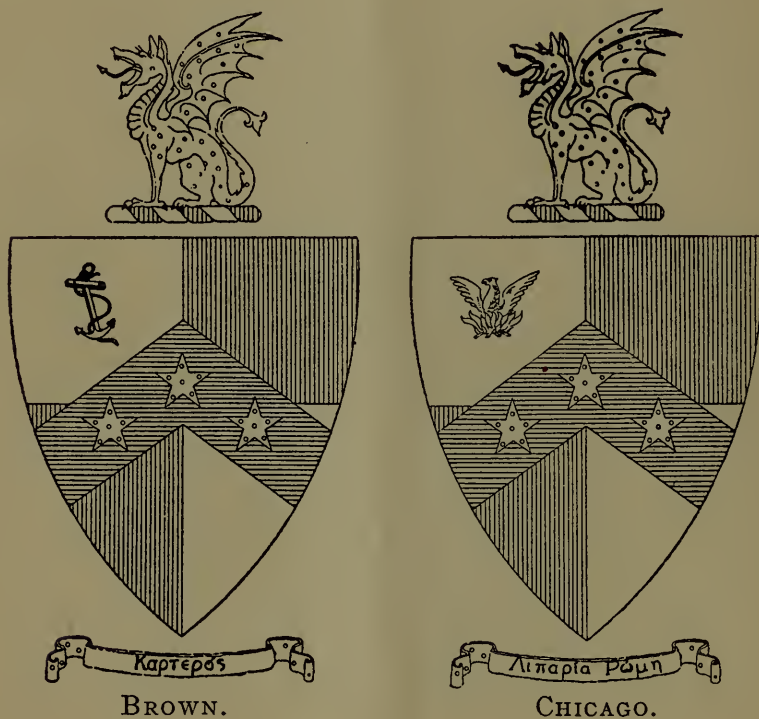
DEPAUW.

The convention of 1869 adopted a coat of arms designed by John I. Covington, of Alpha, truly heraldic but somewhat overloaded, which was to form the basis of the great seal for attesting charters. This seems never to have been used until the convention of 1879 adopted a great seal complete also drawn by Covington and similar to the arms of ten years before but rearranging and omitting some of the details and then ruining the whole by adding things in no way related to Beta Theta Pi. When the revised constitution and laws were adopted in 1897 a new coat of arms recalling in a slight degree the arms of 1869 was included and the great seal simplified and made to conform to the arms, replaced the overloaded one of 1879.

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In 1889 at the semi-centennial anniversary of the fraternity at Miami the rose was adopted as the fraternity flower.

The fraternity flag has also undergone a change, Covington's design of 1890 being overhauled by making the white line inside the border into a white stripe and substituting for the red rose, which refused to harmonize with the blue field, the dragon crest, in red which has no quarrel with the white stripe in the middle of the flag. The three white stars still remain on



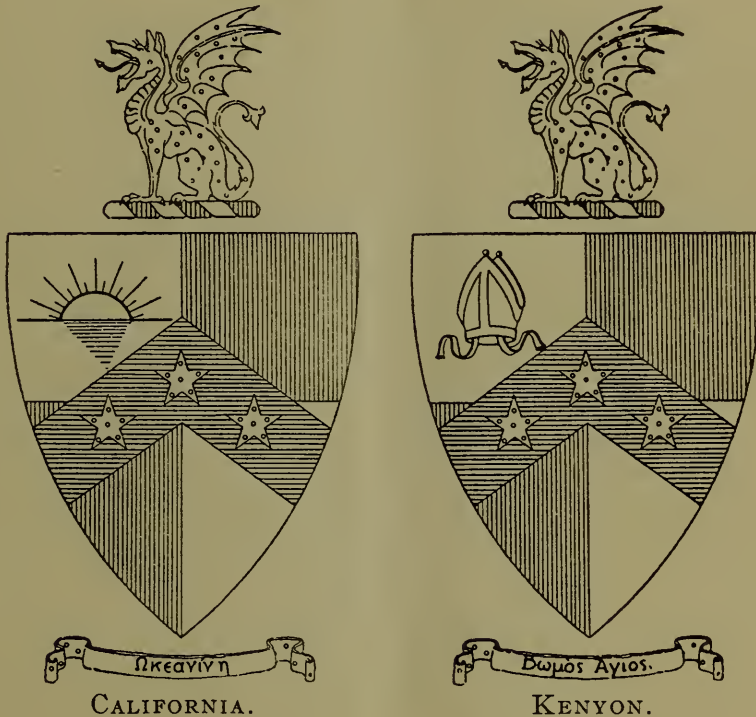
the blue stripes and the flag is pleasing as well as correct from an heraldic standpoint.

The pledge button, although the latest of our devices, has come in for its share of the changes; making its appearance in 1894 as an eight sided shield of pink and blue enamels displaying the three letters, it finished its development in 1899 as a white button with three gold stars.

About this time the shingle appeared in the Cornell chapter and rapidly gained favor. It displays the member's name and class in old English with the fraternity arms above and a chapter seal below. This device is uniformly framed in a narrow black frame and is inconspicuously displayed in the member's room.

When the Beta coat of arms was devised in 1897 it was the intention later to delve into the traditions of each of our chapters and colleges with a view to getting something typical of each to charge on the first quarter of the fraternity arms, thereby making an appropriate coat of arms for each chapter.

The idea lay dormant until last year when the Michigan chapter appealed to the board of trustees to sanction the arms which it had adopted based on this scheme. The board, not



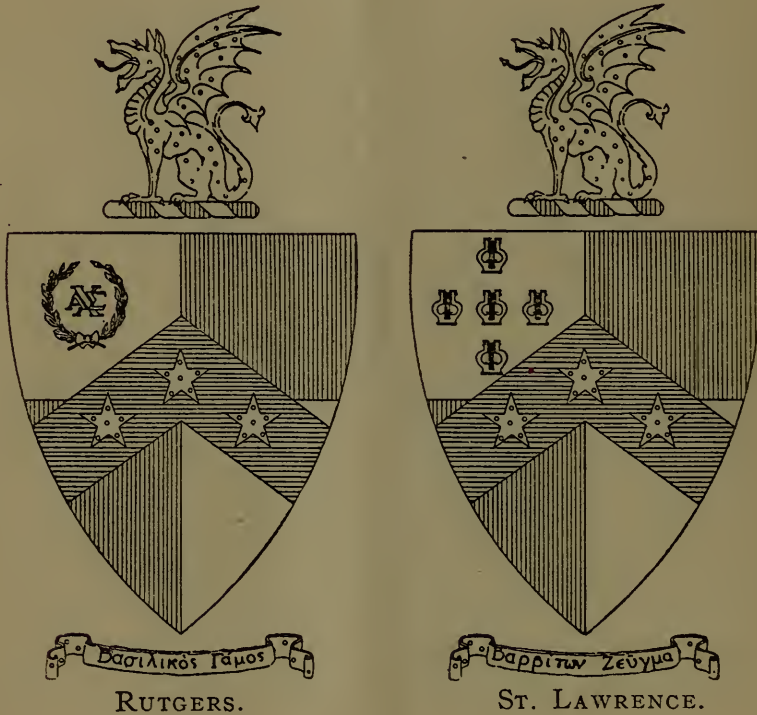
having any authority under the law, sought such and the convention of 1909 accordingly legislated that a chapter with the approval of the board of trustees could adopt a coat of arms.

By placing the matter in the care of the board of trustees the convention indicated its desire that no designs should be used by any chapter which fail to conform to recognized principles of heraldry. To assure this the board has arranged for securing expert advice.

The board under this law has granted the request of the Michigan chapter for a coat-of-arms. This consists of the fraternity arms, the first quarter of which bears the University arms which displays the lamp of knowledge upon two books.

The crest, of course, remains the same but the motto is changed to one beginning with the chapter letter, Lambda, *Λυχνος τοῖς ποσί μου* "a lamp unto my feet" being a portion of the 105th verse of the CIXth Psalm, the Septuagint version.

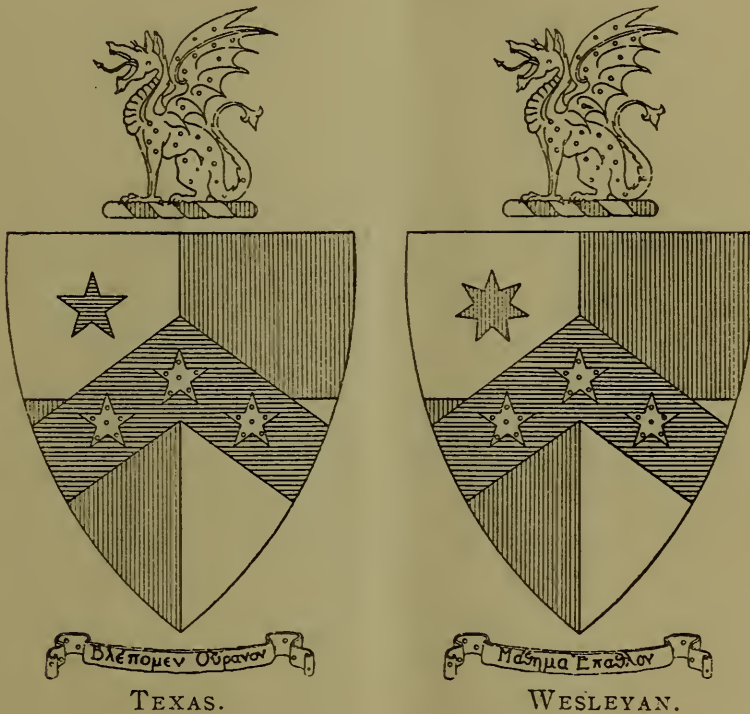
The first ten of our chapters are perfectly provided with arms in accord with the ancient rule of heraldry. The Miami chapter, of course, bears the arm of Beta Theta Pi unchanged save for the motto which now begins with "A". The next



nine chapters bear the fraternity arms "differenced" as the laws of English heraldry provide for the nine sons in a family. By differencing is meant charging the Marks of Cadency or the Marks of Difference, sometimes called Brisures, upon the upper part of the shield, thereby indicating to which branch of a family its bearer belongs.

The first of these marks of cadency is the Label or File, therefore, Cincinnati bears the Beta arms differenced by a label, a sort of three pronged rake, with crest unchanged but with the motto beginning with "B N". Western Reserve, the second branch, differences by a crescent and shows a motto beginning with "B"; Ohio, the third, displays in chief a mullet, or star, and

a "BK" motto, Transylvania 'tho long dead has not lost its right to the device of the fourth of the house and bears a martlet; Washington and Jefferson bears, in the right of old Jefferson, the fifth branch, an annulet and its motto begins with "T"; the sixth, Harvard, displays a fleur-de-lys with an "H" motto; Princeton, the seventh is indicated by a rose; the eighth, De Pauw, is distinguished by a cross moline and a "Δ" motto; and Indiana, the ninth, is marked with a double quatre-



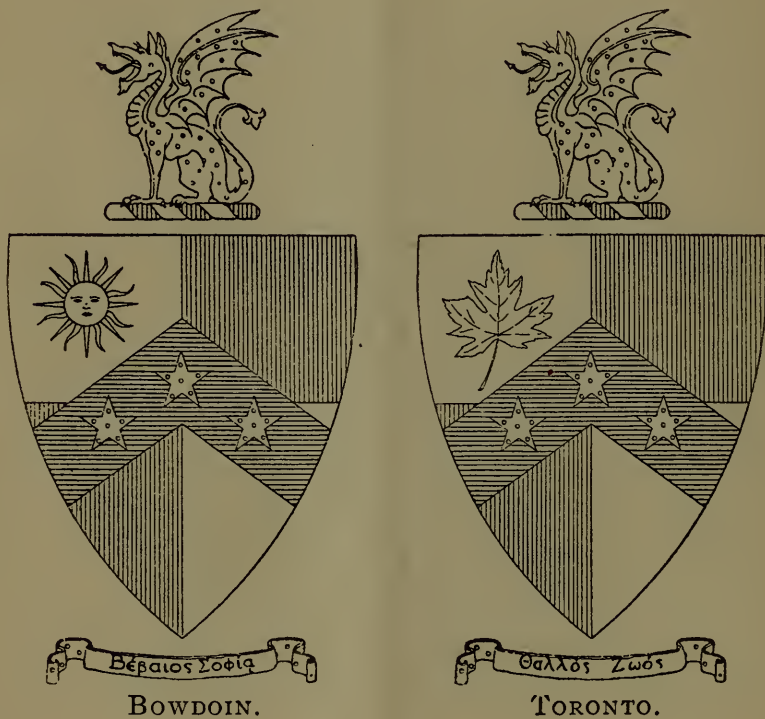
foil and a motto whose initial letter is "Π". As English heraldry did not suppose a man to rejoice in more than nine sons, Michigan, the tenth branch, had to seek her blazon elsewhere.

Many of the other chapters seem to be obviously supplied with characteristic devices admirably adapted for display in the waiting first quarter. Brown seems naturally to display the ever present symbol of the state wherein it is located; the Anchor of Hope, and Chicago obviously chooses a Phoenix not only because its city rose from its ashes but the University and the chapter were likewise born again. Washington University might with propriety display the arms of the father of his country augmented by the fleur-de-lys of Louis IX of France for whom

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the city was named, while California could choose no device save the setting sun disappearing into the sea and lighting with its closing eye Omega's home.

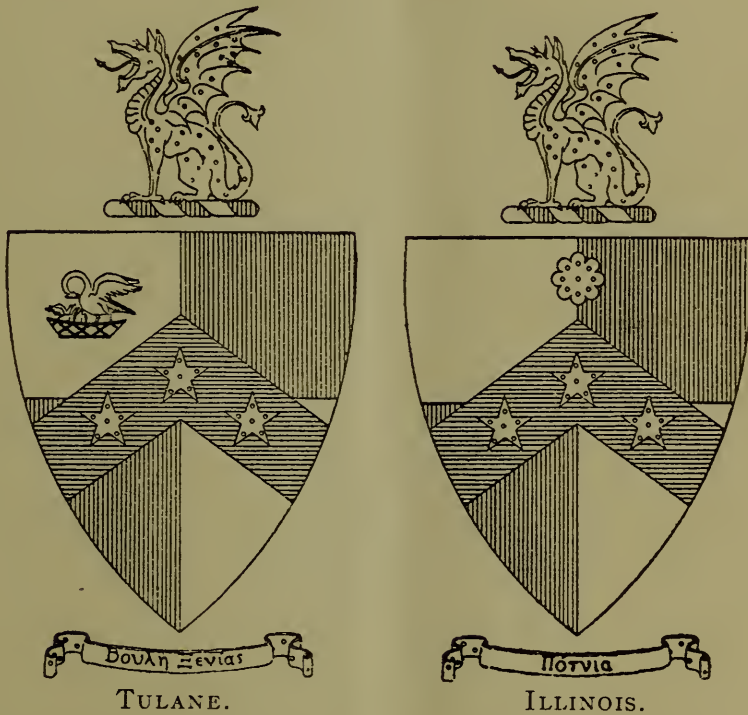
Kenyon as an Episcopal college and recalling that the first name on Beta Alpha's roll is that of the present Bishop of Michigan would charge the white quarter with a bishop's mitre. Rutgers would obviously display the old Alpha Sigma Chi monogram badge surrounded by the Beta wreath and St.



Lawrence recalling her origin and enjoying the play upon words must display her time honored Five Lyres even to the exclusion of her gridiron.

Texas like Brown would charge with the device of her state and the first quarter would bear the lone star. It might be well to add here that this would result in no confusion with the arms of the Ohio chapter since differenced arms always bear the symbol in chief, that is in the middle of the upper part of the shield and over any devices which the shield itself may display. Then, too, one motto containing words whose initials are „B” and “K” and the other beginning with “B” and “O” would preclude any confusion.

The Wesleyan chapter arms would naturally display the Mystic seven pointed star and Bowdoin recalling her college seal and the fact that she is in the easternmost state would charge with the "sun in splendor" to use the heraldic term. Toronto as our first Canadian chapter could choose only the badge of our great northern neighbor, the maple leaf, and Tulane without second thought would adopt a "pelican in her piety," the symbol of the state of Louisiana.



These few illustrations of the beauty and adaptability of our system to chapter heraldry might be added to very materially as for instance for Colorado Mines a miner's lamp or a crucible, for the three-headed serpent of the old society, for Bowdoin from the college seal. Amherst might display a crown or possibly some device from the arms of the college, Dartmouth perhaps the clenched hand from the badge or the whole or a portion of the arms of the college and for chapters whose college arms or state traditions do not furnish material there is an excellent heraldic devices which might be arbitrary, crosses of various kinds, a pale, a fess or a



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chevron, a fret, a shell, an animal, bird or a fish, a tree, castle, arrow, spear, horn, spur, sword, sheaf, mermaid, etc., etc., for in heraldry most things real or imaginary have been used and about the only place to stop with such charges would be simply where good taste would seem to indicate.

The illustrations and designs which accompany this brief article show how the arms are displayed, and, are with appropriate mottoes, having as initials the chapter names in Greek. These mottoes have been in most cases furnished by Brother J. Cal. Hanna who has taken much interest in the matter.

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